

MARXISM AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF
PAUL LEROY ROBESON

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ABSTRACT

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Marxism and the African-American Intellectual: An Analysis of the
Political Philosophy of Paul Leroy Robeson.

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The objective of this thesis is an assessment of the congruency between the political philosophy of Paul Robeson and Marxism as a political philosophy. This assessment is based on analysis of Robeson's speeches and writings on the following subjects: culture; imperialism and national liberation; and the working class and labor unions. The assessment of Robeson's philosophy is in turn viewed against the backdrop of Marxist philosophy relative to: culture, imperialism and national liberation; and the working class and labor unions.

This thesis is in no way exhaustive or final. In fact, it must be viewed and accepted as a brief analysis of Robeson's political philosophy, not a comprehensive critique of his philosophy, much less an intellectual biography.

The analysis reveals that there is a congruence between Robeson's philosophy and Marxism as a philosophy. Moreover, the analysis also shows how the Marxist character of Robeson's philosophy became more pronounced as he matured and developed intellectually. This was especially true with respect to his view on culture.

DEDICATION

For their courage, persistence, and exemplary commitment to freedom and justice, to Ms. Dawson and the older people of Sweet Auburn who are a concrete manifestation of our historical struggle for self-determination.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This thesis is more than two years overdue. On September 29, 1982 someone broke into my study carrell and stole my briefcase, which contained drafts of the Introduction and Chapter I of this thesis, and the note cards for Chapters II and III. Following this demoralizing experience, I lost momentum as I slowly tried to reconstruct my note cards and maintain my sanity at the same time. Surviving this trauma has not been easy, nor has it been a solo act. Many of my comarades and friends played a key role in this saga. Their solidarity, companionship, criticism, and mere existence at times, has made a real difference. And to all of them I graciously and sincerely say: Thank You!!

Of those whose assistance I can openly acknowledge I wish to thank in particular Drs. Makidi Ku-Ntima, Mack H. Jones, and Hashim Gibrill, for their assistance as my advisors, and Makidi for helping me understand the dialectics of philosophy and other things I need not mention. I also acknowledge the assistance of comrades: Kamau, T. B., Ajamu, Kwame, Rob, and Danny Boston for the understanding of political economy we gained together and continue to share.

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the aims of some, Paul Robeson is slowly gaining his rightful place in the pages of history. History is beginning to show that Robeson was a great forerunner of the twentieth century black protest movement. History is also showing that he was one of the most courageous, committed, and principled activist to ever speak on behalf of black and oppressed people. As an intellectual, he exemplified all the characteristics one associates with the committed intellectual. As Paul Baran put it:

...An intellectual is in essence a social critic, a person whose concern is to identify, to analyze, and in this way to help overcome the obstacles barring the way to the attainment of a better, more humane, and more rational social order. As such he becomes the conscience of society and the spokesman of such progressive forces as it contains in any given period of history. And as such he is inevitably considered a "trouble maker and a nuisance" by the ruling class seeking to preserve the status quo, as well as the intellect workers in its service who accuse the intellectual of being utopian and metaphysical at best, subversive or seditious at worst...¹

These words capture very well the essence of Robeson's commitment not only as an intellectual, but also as an artist and activist. As an artist and activist Robeson was in close solidarity with the progressive forces in American artistic and political life. He also wrote and spoke on behalf of labor unions, and the liberation movements in the colonial territories of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.²

¹Paul A. Baran, "The Commitment of the Intellectual," Monthly Review, 16 (March 1965): 1-12.

²Philip S. Foner, ed., Paul Robeson Speaks. (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1978), pp. 3-27.

Although Robeson's political life was long, intensive, and controversial, little systematic attention has been given to this dimension of his life. In fact, most of the literature on Robeson can be categorized as follows: 1) Atheoretical biographies, and 2) critiques on Robeson's cultural philosophy. The biographical material on Robeson is plentiful, but it is not very insightful with regard to this political philosophy. On the other hand, the critiques of his cultural philosophy are not plentiful, but they are a little more insightful. However, the insights afforded by this segment of the literature are limited by the fact that, in the main this category is composed of mainly rejoinders between Harold Cruse and Sterling Stuckey.

This study is an effort toward a broader analysis of Robeson's political philosophy. As such it will assess the congruency between Marxism as a political philosophy and Robeson's political philosophy.

The term Marxism, as it refers to political philosophy, is very ambiguous and should not be used without qualification. Indeed "the term 'Marxism' is used to refer to a vast class of doctrines, all of which claim to be legitimate interpretations and/or developments of the thought of Karl Marx."³ The impact of this situation is aggravated by the fact that the history of Marxism covers nearly one and a half centuries, and developed in three different cultures: German, Russian, and Chinese. To these we should also add the English and French cultures which Lenin identifies as sources of

³Joseph M. Bochenski, et al, Guide to Marxist Philosophy. (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1972).

Marxism.⁴ Moreover, another dimension of this problem is the antagonistic relationship that has existed between Marxism and liberalism as political philosophies. The dialectics of this relationship has led to the proliferation of literature that does little to present and clarify the major tenets of Marxist philosophy. Thus, given this reality we must come to terms with the various "Marxism" and indicate which one will be used as our point of departure.

Some scholars contend that given the present development of Marxist philosophy one can make several distinctions between the various forms of Marxism. Joseph Bochenski⁵ identifies seven forms of Marxism:

- 1) The thought of Karl Marx.

- 2) German Classical Marxism. The founding and development of this variety of Marxism is credited to Marx's lifelong friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels. It was further developed by a group of German socialists, among whom Karl Kautsky is said to be the most significant figure.⁶ The philosophy which evolved from this tradition was significantly different from the thought of Karl Marx. Bochenski summarizes the thrust of these differences as follows:

- (a) While Marx explicitly rejected every intellectualistic, speculative system of philosophy and favored a pragmatic

⁴V. I. Lenin, Collected Works, 42 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964) 4:23-28.

⁵Bochenski, Marxist Philosophy, pp. 4-6.

⁶Ibid, p. 5.

approach (praxis), Engels developed a speculative system.

- (b) While Marx favored an approach to philosophy which was... anthropocentric (beginning with man, considering nature in reference to him), Engels' thought is clearly cosmocentric; it begins with the laws which are supposed to rule the world at large and only then proceeds to study man and society.
- (c) One doctrine which seems to have basic importance for Marx, namely the theory of alienation, is practically ignored by Engels.⁷

Furthermore, we must note that since the philosophical writings of Marx were basically unknown in the nineteenth century, the philosophy of Engels was often incorrectly taken to be the same as that of Marx.⁸

3) The thought of Lenin. As a Russian and a revolutionary, Lenin was profoundly influenced by the Russian revolutionary thinkers. In addition to embracing classical German Marxism, that is while identifying Marx with Engels, Lenin also articulated a number of original ideas which gave his philosophy a distinct character. Although Lenin was not the only Russian Marxist of his time (there was also Bukharin, Trotsky, and others), it was he who became the political leader of the Bolsheviks, and it is his views which prevailed in the Soviet Union.⁹

4) Marxism-Leninism. Drawing heavily on the thought of Lenin, the Russian communist built this vast body of doctrines during and after Lenin's time. The history of this philosophy is rather long and complex; however, it is generally understood that this category

⁷Ibid, p. 5.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

of Marxist thought represents the mature and well developed philosophy which Marx and Engels inaugurated in the late nineteenth century.

5) Neo-Marxism. This particular variation of Marxism was developed in many of the new communist countries following World War II. Initially the adherents to this school of thought had no original philosophy; most of their works were merely translations of Russian writings. However, since about 1953, this variety of Marxism has taken on an original character. This can be seen in its strong opposition to Marxism-Leninism, and its identification with the authentic young Marx.

6) Chinese Marxism. The theoretical development of this body of thought is credited to Mao Tse-tung. As a theorist, Mao is said to have been in opposition to Russian Marxism and the thought of Lenin. A careful reading of his writings, however, will show that such was not the case. Instead, Mao's thought represents an attempt to apply and develop Marxist-Leninist philosophy in relation to the dynamics of Chinese reality.¹⁰ Furthermore, an analysis of his two major theoretical works: "On Contradictions" and "On Practice" will show the consistency between his thought and that of Lenin.¹¹

7) New Left Thought. This tendency is the product of a small

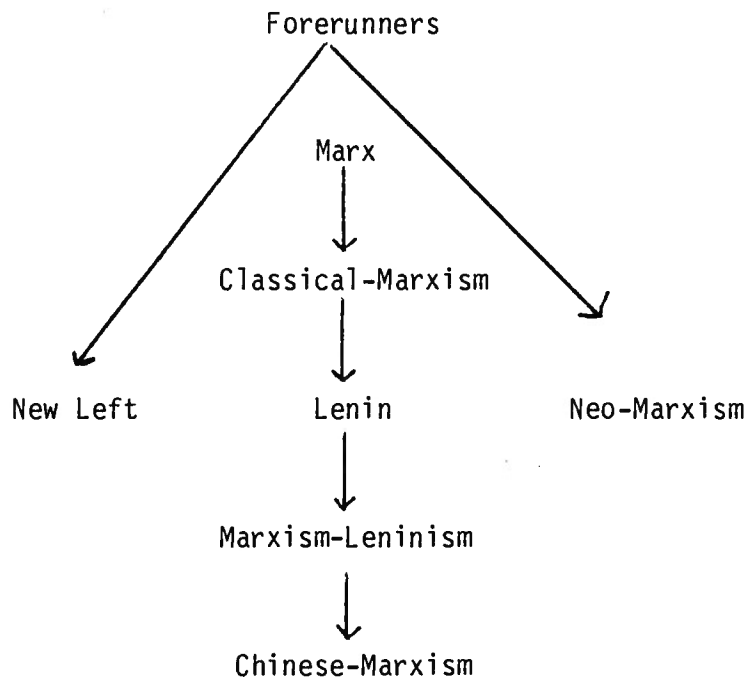
¹⁰Dick Wilson, Mao Tse-tung in the Scales of History. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 9-35.

¹¹Mao Tse-tung, Selected Works, 5 vols. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 1:295-345.

group of West European and North American philosophers.

Philosophically there is little common teaching among this group whose most articulate proponent is Herbert Marcuse. Moreover, this particular tendency is more a socio-political movement than a philosophical school of thought.¹² Consequently, the adherents of this tendency are more concerned with political tactics than philosophical issues.¹³

The interrelationship between these various forms of Marxism is summarized in the following diagram:



Source: Joseph M. Bochenski, ed. Guide to Marxist Philosophy (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1972), p. 6.

¹²Bochenski, Marxist Philosophy, p. 6.

¹³Ibid.

The preceding discussion does not exhaust all the possible varieties of Marxism; nevertheless, it does underscore the relationship and presumptions of the various forms of Marxism. It also underscores the need for one to specify "whose" or "what" Marxism is being used in a given study. It should also be clear that the various categories of Marxism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, among these various forms of Marxism there are significant distinctions to be made.

In this study Marxism-Leninism will be our point of departure. More will be said about this in the context of political philosophy later in the body of the paper. At this point a simple outline of what Marxism is, how it came to be, and the challenges it represents will suffice.

"Marxism is, writes Burns,¹⁴ a general theory of the world in which we live, and human society as a part of that world." Marxism-Leninism is simply the further development of this theory by Lenin to make it applicable in the era of monopoly capitalism.¹⁵ Thus, as a mature theory of the world Marxism grew out of the pioneering of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

As pioneers of Marxism, Marx and Engels set out to discover the laws of human society. That is, they sought to discover what moved human society from one stage of development to the next. This quest

¹⁴Emile Burns, An Introduction to Marxism. (New York: International Publishers, 1981), p. 7.

¹⁵Boris N. Ponomarev, Marxism-Leninism. (New York: International Publishers, 1979), p. 4.

brought them to the conclusion that such movements follow a definite pattern or set of rules, and by drawing on this they were able to develop a scientific theory of society, based on the real life experiences of man.¹⁶

Consequently with this came the first coherent theory of society to transcend the limits of metaphysics. Thus, it is in Marxism that we find the first cogent development of the dialectical world view. Unlike metaphysics, this world view seeks to explain the development of human society with the same scientific precision used in explaining the development of nature.¹⁷ Moreover, as Emile Burns¹⁸ notes, this view of the world is:

...based on the actual experience of men as opposed to vague notions about society which used to be (and still are) put forward-notions associated with religious beliefs, race and hero-worship, personal inclinations or utopian dreams.

This scientific (or dialectical) approach to the development of society is rooted in experience, on the facts of human history and the world in which history is made. Hence, Marxism is not the final word or a finished theory, as history unwinds, as man gains more knowledge, Marxism is constantly being developed and applied to these new realities.¹⁹ The most notable manifestations of this can be found in the work of V. I. Lenin. Working during the close of the nineteenth

¹⁶Burns, Marxism, pp. 7-10.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 7-10.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 8.

century and the early twentieth century, Lenin worked to enrich and develop Marxist theory relative to the new historical conditions.²⁰ As Baran and Sweezy point out, his contribution toward an understanding of capitalism during the epoch of imperialism is omnipotent in this respect.²¹ Consequently, given these developments, Marxism has been and remains inconceivable without the contributions of Lenin.²²

As a political philosophy Marxism-Leninism represents a direct challenge to the philosophy of capitalism. As Gus Hall notes:

Marxism-Leninism grew out of the struggles of the vanguard of the working class from the days of Marx and Engels, out of the revolutionary struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which continue into our own days.²³

As the philosophy of the working class Marxism-Leninism has been the vanguard of ideological attacks since the late nineteenth century.²⁴ Most of these attacks have come from the philosophical camp of the bourgeoisie-liberalism.

Methodology

The primary objective of this study is an assessment of the congruency between the political philosophy of Paul Robeson and

²⁰Ponomarev, Marxism-Leninism, pp. 1-7.

²¹Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Monopoly Capital. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), pp. 1-14.

²²Ponomarev, Marxism-Leninism, 4.

²³Ibid, p. 5.

²⁴Ibid.

Marxism as a political philosophy. This assessment will be based on an analysis of Robeson's thought relative to the subjects of culture; imperialism and national liberation; and the working class and trade unions. As a secondary (but also important) objective, this study will also seek to discern whether Robeson's political practice was consistent with his philosophy. That is, we shall be concerned with questions of both description and prescription, of the dialectical relationship between theory and practice.

The research question which guides this study is:

Can the political philosophy of Paul Robeson be characterized as Marxist based on his writings and comments relative to the subjects of culture; imperialism and national liberation; and the working class and trade unions?

This will help to facilitate the development of a theoretically structured analysis of Robeson's thought.

Data for this study is generated through a content analysis technique. This technique calls for an analysis of the major Marxist writings and the writings and speeches of Robeson on the subjects listed above.

Verification of the hypothesis involved a three stage process of deductive analysis. Stage one of this process involved the development of a general Marxist-Leninist (or orthodox Marxist) position on the subjects of culture; imperialism and national liberation; and the working class and trade unions. This was developed from an analysis of the relevant Marxist writings on these subjects.

Stage two of this process entailed a delineation of Robeson's position or philosophy relative to the aforementioned subjects. This

was developed by a content analysis of the writing and speeches of Robeson.

Finally, stage three entailed an effort to compare the philosophy of Robeson with that of Marxism. Thus, this stage called for the analysis of the findings from stages one and two.

The preceding introduction should amplify the difficult nature of any study like that which follows. It should also underscore the fact that what follows is in no way exhaustive or final. Hence, what follows is merely a brief analysis of Robeson's political philosophy, not a comprehensive critique of his philosophy, much less an intellectual biography.

CHAPTER I
ORTHODOX MARXISM

As Political Philosophy

What is philosophy? In a very general sense, it can be defined as a conception of the world. However, if we seek to be more specific we can see, as Gramsci²⁵ notes that there are two forms of philosophy. First, there is spontaneous (or popular) philosophy, and then there is scientific philosophy. Spontaneous philosophy, Gramsci contends, is proper to everybody. As such it is clearly

...contained in: 1) language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concerns and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2) "common sense" and "good sense"; and 3) popular religion and therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting which are collectively bonded together under the name of folklore.²⁶

In the main, spontaneous philosophy represents only a fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions, which constitutes an uncritical and disjointed conception of the world. Scientific philosophy, on the other hand, represents a critical, coherent, and consciously developed conception of the world, which serves as a guide to man's action.²⁷

From this we can conclude that political philosophy is a critical, coherent, and consciously developed conception of the world, which serves to guide political action. Since there is no one

²⁵Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 323.

²⁶Ibid., p. 323.

²⁷Ibid, pp. 321-343.

monolithic philosophy, Marxism is simply one particular conception of the world and guide to political action. Like any philosophy, it is composed of a descriptive property that seeks to explain the course of world and social development; a prescriptive property that outlines the agency of social change; and an ideology that describes the desired social order it seeks to reach.

The world outlook of Marxism is known as dialectical materialism. "It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of studying and apprehending them is dialectical, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of these phenomena, its theory is materialistic."²⁸ The intellectual roots of dialectical materialism can be linked to the German philosophers G. F. W. Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach. Hegel is said to have formulated the main features of modern materialism.²⁹ This does not mean, however, that the dialectical method of Marx and Engels is the same as Hegel's. As a matter of fact, their dialectical method "...is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite."³⁰ That is, from the Hegelian dialectic they took "only its rational kernel, casting aside its idealistic shell, and developed it further so to lend it a modern scientific form."³¹ A similar situation

²⁸Joseph Stalin, Dialectical and Historical Materialism. (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 5.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Karl Marx, Capital, 3 Vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 1:19.

³¹Stalin, Dialectical Materialism, p. 6.

developed in the case of Feuerbach's materialism.³² According to materialist dialectics, in order to understand the development of any phenomenon we must study it "internally and in its relations with other things...."³³ That is, materialist dialectics hold that,

...The development of things should be seen as their internal and necessary self-movement.... The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies within the contradictoriness within a thing.³⁴

Hence, the changes that take place in nature are the result of the development of the internal contradictions in nature. The same holds true for society where changes are,

Due chiefly to the development of the internal contradictions in society, that is, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction between classes and the contradiction between the old and the new....³⁵

Therefore, according to materialist dialectics the world is viewed as an ensemble of contradictory relationships, and when applied to society it holds that the driving force of social development is the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production. Furthermore, at the political level this contradiction is manifested in the antagonism between classes.

Marxism views capitalist society as the product and personification of class struggle. For instance, in their Communist Manifesto

³²Ibid., p. 6.

³³Mao Tse-tung, Collected Works 5 Vols., 1:313.

³⁴Ibid., 1:313.

³⁵Ibid., 1:314.

Marx and Engels argued that,

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society, has not done away with class antagonism. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: It has simplified the class antagonism. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other--bourgeoisie and proletariat.³⁶

These two classes constitute the fundamental contradiction and driving force of capitalist society. How are these classes determined?

Classes are groups of people defined principally, but not exclusively, by their place in the production process, writes Poulantzas.³⁷ It should also be noted that for the Marxists class distinctions are not based simply on relative size of income. Instead, these distinctions are based on a group's place in the relations of production.³⁸ Moreover, in a class divided society the

³⁶Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Communist Manifesto. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1979), p. 32.

³⁷Nicos Poulantzas, "On Social Classes," New Left Review 78 (1974):27-54.

³⁸Ibid.

relations of production are manifested in two forms.³⁹

...Relations first between men and other men--class relations, and second, between the agents of production and the objects and means of labor--the productive forces.⁴⁰

These two relations in turn embrace the

...Relation of the nonworker (the owner) to the object and means of labor and the relation of the immediate producer (direct worker) to the object and means of labour.⁴¹

In addition to this, these relations also involve two important aspects of the production process:

- A. Economic ownership: By this is meant real economic control of the means of production; and
- B. Possession: By this is meant the capacity to put the means of production into operation.⁴²

In bourgeois or capitalist society the bourgeoisie constitutes the owners of the means of production. This allows them to exploit the direct worker (proletariat) by extorting surplus value.⁴³

The exploitive economic relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat constitutes the objective basis of class struggle in capitalist society. Marxism views this relationship as exploitive because contrary to its appearance it is not one of equality or equity. That is, when the proletariat enters a relationship with the

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

bourgeoisie, by selling labour power, they do so not of free will, but due to the fact that in order to survive they have no choice since the bourgeoisie owns and controls all the means of production. Furthermore, given the dynamics of capitalist production when the bourgeoisie consumes the workers' labour power (by setting it to work) they gain much more from the relationship than they put in. For example, when the capitalist buys the labour power of a worker he gets the "right" to consume it for a specific period of time at a definite rate (or wage). Moreover, given the nature of capitalist production, in the course of a work period (i.e. a day) the worker will create a commodity (or commodities) for the capitalist whose value exceeds the value paid for his work. Let us take the following scenario as an illustration: A worker is employed by a chair manufacturer. He is paid a wage of twenty-four dollars for an eight-hour work period. In the course of four hours the worker produces four chairs valued at twenty-four dollars. Since he has an "obligation" to work eight hours he must continue producing. Thus, at the end of the eight-hour work day he has produced a total of eight chairs worth a sum total of forty-eight dollars. All of which belongs to the capitalist. Therefore, as John Eaton notes,

of the new values produced a part is "paid for" in wages and a part is "unpaid" surplus value; so we may also say that the working day is similarly divided, thus:⁴⁴

Wages Paid
4 Hours

Surplus Unpaid
4 Hours

⁴⁴John Eaton, Political Economy (New York: International Publishers, 1977), p. 75.

Eaton also notes that,

The unceasing aim and mission of the capitalist is to increase his profit, to expand his capital. He struggles, therefore, untiringly, by all and every means to increase his share of the values created by labour and to decrease the share going to the worker as wages.⁴⁵

Hence, it is this economic struggle that serves as the objective or material basis of the political and ideological class struggle that moves capitalist society closer to its inevitable death. According to Marxist philosophy this struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat can only be done away with through the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of communism via a period of scientific socialism.

Here we say scientific socialism primarily to differentiate it from utopian or idealistic ideas of socialism. Although scientific socialism has a historical and intellectual connection with utopian socialism the two are fundamentally different. The utopian socialist, as Engels notes, are the intellectual forefathers of scientific socialism. The most important and influential thinkers from this school of thought are: Saint Simon, Fourier, and Robert Owen. The content of their political ideas were products of a recognition, of the class antagonism prevailing in capitalist society, and the anarchy ruling in production.⁴⁶ With the arrival of this intellectual current,

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Frederick Engels, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1975).

The demand for equality was no longer limited to political rights but was also extended to the social conditions of individuals; it was not merely class privileges that were to be abolished but class distinctions themselves.⁴⁷

Furthermore, like the philosophers of the Enlightenment, these early socialist sought to bring society within the realm of reason and eternal justice. As a consequence of this,

Not one of them appears as a representative of the proletariat.... Like the philosophers of the Enlightenment, they want to emancipate not a particular class to begin with, but all of humanity at once.⁴⁸

It should be noted, however, that during their time the capitalist mode of production, and with it the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was still undeveloped.⁴⁹ This profoundly influenced the nature of their thinking. "Their immature theories corresponded to the immature state of capitalist development and the immature class situation."⁵⁰

Unlike utopian socialism, scientific socialism is committed to the liberation of a specific class: the proletariat, and the destruction of capitalist exploitation.⁵¹ Thus, for the Marxist "socialism means the abolition of classes,"⁵² and the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 52.

⁵¹V. I. Lenin, Collected Works 30:114.

⁵²Ibid.

However, this does not mean that classes are nonexistent under socialism.⁵³ Class still exist under socialism but the relations between classes have undergone a profound change. "The class struggle does not disappear under the dictatorship of the proletariat; it merely assumes different forms."⁵⁴ To be more specific, classes have traded places. Because, as Lenin points out,

Under capitalism the proletariat was an oppressed class, a class which had been deprived of the means of production, the only class which stood directly and completely opposed to the bourgeoisie, and therefore, the only one capable of being revolutionary to the very end. Having overthrown the bourgeoisie and conquered political power, the proletariat has become the ruling class; it yields state power, it exercises control over means of production already socialized; it guides the wavering and intermediary elements and classes; it crushes the increasingly stubborn resistance of the exploiters. All these are specific tasks of the class struggle, tasks which the proletariat formerly did not and could not have set itself.⁵⁵

On Culture

From the standpoint of Marxist philosophy, culture is organically linked to the material basis of society. To borrow from the words of Amilcar Cabral,

Culture is an essential element of the history of a people. Culture is perhaps, the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the

⁵³Ibid., 30:107-17.

⁵⁴Ibid., 30:115.

⁵⁵Ibid.

mode of production.⁵⁶

As such culture is always the dynamic expression of the kinds of relationships that prevail in a given society.⁵⁷ It encompasses relationships between man and nature, on one hand; and on the other it involves relationships between groups of individuals, social strata or classes.⁵⁸ In short, culture is the ideological reflection of the political and economic dynamics of a society.⁵⁹

The materialist conception of culture should not be viewed as simply economistic. It is often noted that for the Marxist political, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc development is based on economic development. What is overlooked, however, is their position on the other factors that exist at the level of super-structure. Engels once wrote that,

According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements superstructure--political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc.--forms of law --and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in

⁵⁶Amilcar Cabral, Return to the Source. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 42.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Mao Tse-tung, On Literature and Art. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), pp. 1-44.

the brains of the combatants: political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma--also exercised their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their forms.⁶⁰

Moreover, another important contention that is germane to the Marxist position on culture is the notion that culture has an undeniable class character.

According to Marxist philosophy culture is never politically neutral. That is, culture is viewed as a class biased phenomena. In fact, Lenin⁶¹ contends that in all national cultures there can be found two cultures: The culture of the toiling and exploited masses, on the one hand, and the culture of the ruling or bourgeois elements on the other. Speaking to this very issue Mao contends that,

In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such things as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, or art that is detached from or independent of politics.⁶²

Thus, for the Marxists culture is the product and an essential part of the class struggle. As such it cannot exist independent of political struggles.

On Imperialism and National Liberation

Marxian political economy views imperialism as a special stage

⁶⁰Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, On Literature and Art, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), p. 57.

⁶¹Robert C. Tucker, ed. The Lenin Anthology. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), pp. 654-58.

⁶²Mao, Literature and Art, p. 25.

in the development of capitalism. Lenin defines it as the monopoly stage of capitalism, says Eaton.⁶³ Given its monopolistic character imperialism is marked by five essential features:

1. The concentration of production and capital develops to such a high stage that it creates monopolies which play a decisive role in the economic life.
2. The merging of bank capital with industrial capital and the creation, on the basis of this "finance capital," of a financial oligarchy.
3. The export of capital, which has become extremely important, as distinguished from the export of commodities.
4. The formation of international capitalist monopolies which share the world among themselves.
5. The completion of the territorial division of the whole world among the greatest capitalist Powers.⁶⁴

Unlike its predecessor, the era of imperialism is not characterized by competitive capitalism. Instead, imperialism is monopoly capitalism par excellence.

The Multinational Corporations (MNCs) are viewed as the most visible manifestation of imperialism. The MNC is the institution that facilitates the movement of finance capital from the major capitalist countries to their colonies or neo-colonies. That is, in the era of imperialism MNCs facilitate the export of capital, as opposed to commodities. Furthermore, at the level of production this involves the brutal exploitation of the people in the colonies, and the pillage

⁶³Eaton, Political Economy, p. 183.

⁶⁴Ibid, pp. 183-4.

of their natural resources. For as Oliver Cox points out,

The essence of imperialism...is exploitation. Domination facilitates exploitation. It is here that the capitalist use of the person and property of others in the interest of domestic enterprise may be observed in their purest forms; that is, the distinctive parasitic relation of capitalist groups to backward peoples.⁶⁵

Although imperialism is viewed as primarily an economic phenomenon, it does have some important political dimensions. One of the most important political dimensions of imperialism is the phenomenon national liberation. For the Marxist national liberation is the anti-thesis of imperialist domination. Thus, for the Marxist national liberation is inherently anti-imperialist.

The anti-imperialist character of the Marxist position on national liberation is best articulated by the Third World revolutionaries themselves. For instance, Amilcar Cabral contends that,

The objective of national liberation is...to reclaim the right usurped by imperialist domination, namely: the liberation of the process of development of national productive forces. Therefore, national liberation takes place when, and only when national productive forces are completely free of all forms of foreign domination.⁶⁶

Turning to the North Korean experience, we hear Kim Il-sung take a similar position when he argues that,

The peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, who had been plundered by Western capitalism and imperialism for centuries, have risen courageously and taken their place on the stage of history. The

⁶⁵Oliver Cox, Capitalism as a System. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), p. 141.

⁶⁶Cabral, Return to the Source, p. 43.

strong tide of national liberation is rising with an irresistible force....⁶⁷

In Latin America we see the same in the works of Ernesto "Che" Guevara.⁶⁸ Thus, in summary, the Marxists view national liberation as a particular contradiction of imperialism.

On the Working Class and Labor Unions

We noted above that for the Marxists the working class is the exploited group in capitalist society. We also explored the dynamics of this exploitation. Therefore, in this final section we will explore the Marxist position on the vanguard nature of the working class; and the contention that labor unions constitute a key weapon of the working class in its struggle with the bourgeoisie.

Marxism views the working class as the revolutionary class in an objective (or structural) sense. That is, the working class occupies this position not by choice, but owing to the objective conditions of its existence.⁶⁹ Moreover, to call the working class revolutionary is a condesention, "it means a class with the historical potential of making a revolution, it is a label for social drive, it is not descriptive of current events...."⁷⁰ Therefore, when the Marxist

⁶⁷Kim Il-sung, Collected Works, 5 Vols. (Pyongyang, Korea: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971), 4:538.

⁶⁸John Gerassi, ed., Venceremos!: The Speeches and Writings of Che Guevara (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1968).

⁶⁹Hal Draper, Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, 2 Vols (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 2:49-80.

⁷⁰Ibid., 2:51.

speaks of the vanguard role of workers reference is made to an objective agency of social revolution in the process of becoming.⁷¹ In short, the working class is viewed as the only class which, due to its material conditions of existence, embodies a social program pointing to the end of capitalism. As Marx one said, the working class has nothing to lose but their chains.

Marxist political philosophy views the labor union as one of the main organizational weapons of the working class.⁷² Draper argues that the labor union is the economic arm, while the proletarian party is the political arm of the working class. The labor union, the theory holds, is best organized to combat the encroachment of capital. However, when the struggle moves to a point that transcends purely economic concerns the proletarian party must come in. Nonetheless, Marxism does emphasize the need to urge labor unions on to higher levels of activity and struggle, along a path that will ultimately result in a commitment to independent political action.⁷³

Labor unions are also viewed as a medium for consciousness raising and politicizing.⁷⁴ Engels often argued that the union is where the workers wage their daily struggle with capital, and train

⁷¹Ibid., 2:49-80.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Charles H. Anderson, The Political Economy of Social Classes. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), pp. 1-22.

themselves on a daily basis.⁷⁵ Furthermore, by organizing the workers on a class basis unions tend to politicize the class struggle between workers and capitalists.⁷⁶

⁷⁵Draper, Marx's Theory of Revolution, 2:49-80.

⁷⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER II

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF PAUL ROBESON: A SUMMARY

Paul Robeson's life covered three quarters of the twentieth century (1898-1976), and carried him to the forefront of many political struggles in both the national and international arena. Like most activist-scholars who were prolific writers, or who lived long politically active lives, he underwent a series of philosophical transformations. The nature of these transformations are such that they should be viewed as signs of political and philosophical maturity. More often than not, however, these transformations are viewed as a sign of political or philosophical vacillation. Moreover, the tendency to view these transformations in such a negative light is the result of critiques and commentaries which fail to analyze the writings of the individuals who are the focus of such critiques. Scholarship of this nature always represents more confusion than clarity. In Paul Robeson's case this has been the situation, and will continue to be so until we accept the fact that "to understand Paul Robeson, one must read what he himself said and wrote...",⁷⁷ as opposed to relying on secondary sources.

Therefore, the present juncture, this study will explore what Robeson said and wrote on the subjects of: culture; imperialism and national liberation; and the working class and labor unions. Here we are primarily concerned with a delineation of Robeson's view of these subjects. A further discussion of his thought will be presented in

⁷⁷Foner, Paul Robeson Speaks, p. 21.

the next chapter. Thus, the purpose of the present chapter is to delineate the basic position of Robeson's Political thought. From here the discussion will attempt to situate Robeson, the thinker, in relation to Marxian political philosophy, and to African-American nationalism.

On Culture

As an artist and intellectual committed to the liberation of black and oppressed people, Robeson maintained a strong commitment to the study of culture. He was particularly interested in African culture during the formative stages of his career as an actor and singer. His interest in this area was broadened as he began to study Chinese culture, and the folk songs of various countries. Through his work and study he came to view culture as the fruits of history, and a vital factor in the equation of national oppression and class exploitation.

The basis, source, and creator of culture are oftentimes viewed as something supernatural or greater than mortal man, and Robeson's early thoughts on this subject are no exception. For instance, in a 1934 essay on African culture he wrote that,

Mankind is gradually feeling its way back to a more fundamental, more primitive, but perhaps truer religion; and religion, the orientation of man to God or forces greater than himself, must be the basis of all culture.

This religion, this basic culture, has its roots in the far east, and in Africa.

What links the American Negro to this culture? It would take a psycho-anthropologist to give it a name; but its nature is obvious to any earnest inquirer.⁷⁸

⁷⁸Foner, Robeson Speaks, pp. 89-90.

Another indication of Robeson's idealistic or metaphysical orientation at this stage in his development is the focus of his early inquiries into Chinese culture. Most of these studies focused on Chinese religion and philosophy. Furthermore, Philip Foner notes that much of this work focused on the major idealistic religio-philosophical Chinese tradition known as taoism.⁷⁹

As Robeson matured, and as his travel and study outside the United States were intensified, his philosophical orientation began to move away from idealism toward materialism. In 1934 he made his first trip to the Soviet Union; and later that year he began to study Marxism and socialism in the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ On his first trip to the Soviet Union, Robeson also met William Patterson. At the time Patterson was legal counsel in the then famous Scottsboro Boys case, and a prominent black figure in the Communist Party of the United States.⁸¹ Robeson's shift to a more materialistic or dialectical conception of culture is clearly displayed in a 1939 magazine interview, in which he describes folk songs as,

...the songs of people, of farmers, workers, miners, road diggers, chain-gang laborers, that come from direct contact with their work, whatever it is. This folk music is as much a creation of mass of people as language. Both are derived from groups.⁸²

In contrast to his earlier contention, here Robeson views man in the

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 79.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 31.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid., p. 131.

context of his material existence as the source and creator of culture. This orientation also came to dominate his thoughts on black music. We can see evidence of this in a 1949 article he wrote on black music. In explaining the origin and nature of black folk songs he argued that,

...the work songs, as well as the songs of protest, are the fruits of collective creation. This rhythm is born out of the work process. It may be synchronized movement of dockworkers loading barges. It may be the measure beat of the crowbar or pickax at excavation sites. It may be the hard monotonous work of the cotton pickers....⁸³

Here and in subsequent speeches and essays Robeson maintained that culture expresses a people's historical journey as productive social beings.

Another insightful dimension of Robeson thoughts on culture is his contention that capitalism was antithetical to the culture of oppressed people. On this point he often argued that,

...The African and American Negro problem is not purely racial. These cultures must be freed, formulated, and developed, and this cannot be done without a change in the present system....⁸⁴

Furthermore, if there is any doubt as to what system he was referring to the following remarks should wipe them clear,

Let me just say that under capitalist conditions, where all forms of expression of American art must subordinate themselves to the demands of the market, our native ...music has been subjected to the very worst exploitation. Commerical jazz has prostituted many splendid models of Negro folk music and has corrupted many talented

⁸³Ibid., p. 215.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 101.

...musicians in order to satisfy the desires of capitalist society.⁸⁵

Drawing on his understanding that culture was linked to politics, Robeson oftentimes argued that the artist had an obligation to be consciously partisan in his work. For him, culture and politics, were actually inseparable.⁸⁶ He was often quoted as saying,

My work as an artist is not in any sense divided from my political work. What I do as an artist is closely bound up with the struggle for a better world.⁸⁷

In one of his celebrated speeches on this point he argued that the nature of political struggle is such that there can be "...no standing above the conflict on olympian heights. There are no impartial observers...⁸⁸ He goes on to say that,

The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative. The history of the capitalist era is characterized by the degradation of my people: dispossessed of their lands, their culture destroyed....⁸⁹

By 1937 Robeson had come to see the need for black artist to become conscious of the political ramifications of their work. Moreover, he humbly notes that this was not always his position. In his book Here I Stand⁹⁰ he contends that, during the early days of his career as an

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 217.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 458.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid, p. 119.

⁹⁰Paul Robeson, Here I Stand, with a preface by Lloyd Brown (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 30-31.

actor his attitude was that the content of a play or film was of little or no significance. Thus, again we see Robeson's orientation pass through a stage of transformation. The sincerity and depth of his commitment on this issue is also reflected in his political practice.

The nature of Robeson's activities as a singer and actor shows an inseparable link between his theory and practice. In 1937 he began to force concert promoters to book his concerts with less affluent and more working class audiences, with the cost of tickets set at prices the working class could afford.⁹¹ This was followed by his decision in the mid forties to completely withdraw from large Hollywood controlled commercial firms.⁹² Later, in March of 1947, he completely abandoned the commercial concert stage, and told a concert audience at the University of Utah,

You have just heard my final concert for at least two years, and perhaps for many more. I am retiring here and now from concert work. I shall sing now for my trade union and college friends. In other words, only at gatherings where I can sing what I please.⁹³

At this point Robeson began to work full time on behalf of labor unions and the African liberation movement.

Imperialism and National Liberation

Robeson began his formal support for anti-imperialist and national liberation struggles in 1937, with the founding of the

⁹¹Foner, pp. 3-27.

⁹²Robeson, Here I Stand, pp. 28-48.

⁹³Foner, Robeson Speaks, p. 35.

Council on African Affairs.⁹⁴ Unlike his colleagues William A. Hunton and W. E. B. Dubois, Robeson never developed any lengthy critiques of imperialist exploitation or national liberation struggles. Therefore, his thoughts on these issues must be gleaned from short speeches, essays, and editorials. However, it is still clear that he understood the essence of imperialism, and the nationalist resistance which it gave birth to. For instance, he held that "one of the most important causes of world tension has been and continues to be imperialist enslavement of nations."⁹⁵ In a 1946 editorial on the colonial plunder of Africa he wrote that,

The onus for this beastly destruction of human dignity, this irresponsible degradation of whole continents of people lies with the sovereign powers, whose ruthless exploitation has been spread over ninety-three percent of the African mainland.⁹⁶

Robeson also showed a clear understanding of neocolonialism when he wrote that,

The use of the vast but as yet untapped resources of Africa for the benefit of African peoples...is a lofty and noble aim.

But this can be achieved only by the Africans themselves, and only when they shake off the shackles of colonialism and are free to develop their own country. It cannot be achieved by foreign financial concerns whose only aim is to make the greatest profit out of exploiting the Africans. Such development plans can bring nothing but untold misery for countless thousands of African peoples.⁹⁷

⁹⁴Hollis R. Lynch, Black American Radicals and the Liberation of Africa (Ithaca, New York: Africana Studies Center, 1978), p. 8.

⁹⁵Foner, Robeson Speaks, p. 400.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 166.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 193.

Although Robeson's writings on this issue are scant, it is still clear that he viewed imperialism as an impediment to the genuine development of colonial societies. It is equally clear that he viewed "genuine" national liberation as the only salvation for the masses of African and "third world" peoples. Thus, in speaking of Nigeria in 1949 he wrote that,

...Immensely rich in resources, both human and material, it requires only freedom and government by its own people in order to transform it...from a backward, undeveloped colonial territory into one of the leading countries of the world.⁹⁸

Moreover, for Robeson this quest for independence was viewed as a world struggle of,

...ordinary working people...challenging the entrenched positions of the privileged and...organizing and fighting to win the rights that have so long been withheld from them....⁹⁹

In his view of the struggle for national liberation, Robeson placed a premium on the vanguard role of the working class. Speaking of Africa he once argued that,

The core of the African nationalist movements, the heart of resistance to continued oppression, the guiding intelligence of the independence aspirations of the African is invariably the organizations of the workers of the continent. Trade unions have arisen all over Africa and, as everywhere in modern times, they are the backbone of the people's struggle.¹⁰⁰

Working Class and Labor Unions

Some contend that the most neglected aspects of Robeson's

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 194.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 247.

political career is his solidarity with organized labor.¹⁰¹ He relentlessly championed the cause of organized labor because of his deep conviction that,

...the ultimate freedom of black people rest on the sturdy backs and unquenchable spirits of the coal miners, carpenters, railroads workers...the vast mass of Negro Americans....¹⁰²

Robeson noted that his belief in the vanguard role of the working class was forged during this initial visits to London. In Here I Stand he explained the developement of his class-consciousness when he observed that,

...in Britain there were those who lived by plundering the colonial peoples, there were also the any millions who earned their bread by honest toil. And as...I came to feel more African in spirit I came to feel a sense of oneness with the white working people whom I came to know and love.¹⁰³

His working class consciousness also lead to his uncompromising support for organized labor in the United States. During a 1940 campaign to organize black auto workers in the Ford Motor Company, Robeson said,

The negro problem cannot be solved by a few of us getting to be doctors and lawyers. The best way my race can win justice is by sticking together in progressive labor unions.¹⁰⁴

Robeson often referred to organized black labor as "potentially the

¹⁰¹Charles H. Wright, Robeson: Labor's Forgotten Champion (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1975).

¹⁰²Foner, Paul Robeson Speaks, p. 331.

¹⁰³Robeson, Here I Stand.

¹⁰⁴Foner, Paul Robeson Speaks, p. 135.

most powerful and effective" force in the black community.¹⁰⁵ On this same point, he goes on to argue that,

It must be seen, too, that in relation to our general struggle for civil rights the Negro trade unionist occupy a key position. They comprise a large part of the membership of our community organizations and at the same time they are the largest section of our people belonging to interracial organizations. Hence, the Negro trade union members are a strategic link, a living connection with the great masses of the common people of America who are our natural allies in the struggle for democracy and whose active support must be won for our side in this critical hour.¹⁰⁶

The struggle of labor, Robeson held, had to be a militant fight transcending narrow trade unionism. Speaking at the 1948 union convention he noted that,

In traveling about the country it is quite clear that the struggle for economic rights, the struggle for higher wages, the struggle for bread, the struggle for housing, have become part of a wider political struggle. They have moved into high places in government, and today the enemies of labor control the working apparatus of the state. They have to be removed. There has to be a basic change.¹⁰⁷

Speaking at another labor gathering he said,

We don't have to ask for crumbs to be dropped from the few up top, but we have the right and responsibility to demand in a militant way a better life for ourselves and for the rest of Americans and the peoples of the world who still suffer and are oppressed.¹⁰⁸

Robeson also presented a special challenge to the white working class. He often said,

¹⁰⁵Robeson, Here I Stand, p. 96.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁰⁷Foner, Paul Robeson Speaks, p. 188.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 185.

Their special responsibility was not simply to ride the wave of indignation and red hot militancy of the Negro, but above all, to lead the white membership to an understanding of its stake in the fight for Negro freedom.¹⁰⁹

Another task he gave them was the development of educational programs to eliminate the notions of white superiority used to poison the minds of white workers.¹¹⁰

The preceding exposition provides a summary of Robeson's political views. It also shows that his views did undergo some significant transformations, and that the nature of these changes represented a significant political and philosophical development. Finally, it gives us the basis for developing further discussion of the nature or character of his political philosophy. That is, from here we can ask the question: Are these views consistent with Marxism as a political philosophy?

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 276.

¹¹⁰Ibid., and Robeson, Here I Stand.

CHAPTER III
MARXISM AND THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
OF PAUL ROBESON

As we noted in the introduction, few attempts have been made to analyze the political philosophy of Paul Robeson. Most of what passes as an analysis of his political philosophy focuses on simply one aspect of his political thought. The best examples of this tendency are the writings of Harold Cruse¹¹¹ and Sterling Stuckey.¹¹² Both of these writers give a significant amount of attention to Robeson's thoughts on culture, but from contrasting positions. That is, Cruse contends that Robeson never developed a philosophy of culture, which could advance the liberation of blacks in America. Stuckey, on the other hand, contends that Robeson did develop such a philosophy of culture.

Given their self constraining focus on culture, the writings of Cruse and Stuckey are not very insightful with respect to the substance and character of Robeson's philosophy. In addition to this problematic there is also the issue of their respective positions on the Marxist character of Robeson's philosophy; and this issue is more

¹¹¹Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York, 1967), and "A Review of the Paul Robeson Controversy," First World, Vol. 2, Nos. 3 and 4 (1979).

¹¹²Sterling Stuckey, "The Cultural Philosophy of Paul Robeson," Freedomways, Vol. 11, No. 1 (First Quarter, 1971): 78-79, and "I Want to be African: Paul Robeson and the Ends of Nationalist Theory and Practice, 1914-1945," Massachusetts Review, 17 (Spring, 1976): 81-140.

germane than any other to our analysis. Thus, we shall explore their respective positions on Robeson's philosophy of culture, and then move to analyze the problematic of their approach to the Marxist character of Robeson's philosophy.

Harold Cruse is the most acrimonious and passionately anti-communist critic of Robeson. His best known critique is the section on Robeson in his book, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, which was published in 1967.¹¹³ He also has two articles that were recently published in First World.¹¹⁴ Although a lot of time stands between his initial and most recent critique, there is no substantive difference between them.

On the issue of culture, Cruse contends that Robeson failed to develop a liberating cultural philosophy.¹¹⁵ This, he maintains, was the result of Robeson subordinating his personal career to left-wing politics. What Cruse means by the term cultural philosophy is never made clear. He is a little more explicit, however, on the idea of Robeson's personal career being subordinate to left-wing politics. Here he is referring to Robeson's involvement in and affinity for what Cruse calls "trade union politics as opposed to cultural (or ethnic) politics. The former is viewed as integrationist, and devoid of any commitment to solving" the range of problems inherent in the inner-

¹¹³Cruse, The Crisis.

¹¹⁴Cruse, "The Robeson Controversy."

¹¹⁵Cruse, The Crisis.

group reality of black existence.¹¹⁶ The latter is more class orientated and focuses on the intra-group reality of black and white workers.

The tone and substance of Cruse's critique is more anti-communist-red baiting than anything else. To refer to Robeson's support of organized labor as left-wing civil rights agitation does not clarify anything, and implies that the aims of organized labor and civil rights agitation are synonymous. The anti-communist nature of his critique is shown very well in his handling of the socialist influence on Robeson's philosophy. However, Cruse maintains that his problem with Robeson is not the issue of communism. He says that,

White opponents of Robeson made communism the issue-- but was that issue the real one? Or was it something else about the Negro in America that communism as an issue, only obscured? The trouble was that Robeson himself, as well as his friends and foes, did everything possible to make communism the issue.¹¹⁷

If communism was not the issue why does it occupy such a dominant (though sometimes camouflaged) position in his critique. For instance, he cites Robeson's "left-wing communist influence" as the motive for his alleged outright rejection of nationalism.¹¹⁸ This same influence is said to be responsible for Robeson's alleged tendency to place "liberation for the people of the ghetto...some

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 296.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 287.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

place far off-outside the community in the class collaborationist dealings of trade unions...."¹¹⁹ Thus, for Cruse Marxism or socialism was never a coherent and rational influence on Robeson's philosophy. Instead it was a source of perpetual confusion and compromises, that resulted from Robeson's towing the political line of the Communist Party.

Stuckey takes a similar position on this issue; but in addition to his narrow focus on culture he also tries to discount the influence socialism had on Robeson's philosophical development. With respect to the issue of culture he contends that Robeson developed a philosophy of culture that was grounded in the black experience. According to Stuckey, Robeson was "...for nearly a half century, the only Afro-American to fashion a philosophy grounded almost completely in the heritage of his people in the U.S. and Africa."¹²⁰ Stuckey also maintains that it is essential to note that Robeson viewed Africa as the most powerful source of black cultural strength and salvation. This emphasis on Africa is cited by Stuckey as an indication of Robeson's commitment to nationalism as opposed to Marxism or socialism.

Robeson's socialist orientation was simply incidental, according to Stuckey. For him Robeson's socialist "...views owed more to the influence of the British Labour Party than to Russia. For

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 299.

¹²⁰Stuckey, "I Want to Be African."

Stuckey, it was through following developments on the labour front in England that his apprenticeship in socialism began in earnest."¹²¹ Stuckey never substantiates, as Philip Foner notes, this sweeping assertion, and can not since the truth of the matter is that,

...Robeson never said that his views on socialism were fashioned by the British Labour Party: he stated that his interest in socialism and Marxism was kindled by his experience in England and by the British Labour Party. It was the Soviet Union that fully strengthened his interest in socialism, and it is significant that he began to study Marxism only after his first visit to the Soviet Union.¹²²

This is not to suggest that Robeson's visits to the Soviet Union were the causal variable in his philosophical development; but it does indicate that, by shying away from the fact that Robeson diligently studied Marxism Stuckey overlooks an important factor in Robeson's political and philosophical development. As a consequence he fails to realize that Robeson advanced

...from being a champion of African nationalist movements to advocacy of African national liberation movements--that is, movements concerned with the socioeconomic content of political independence.¹²³

One may discount the influence Marxism had on Robeson's philosophical development, but the objective reality is there for all to see. Furthermore, an analysis of Robeson's writings that focuses on more than simply culture will show the consistency between his thought and Marxism as a political philosophy.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 117.

¹²²Foner, Robeson Speaks, p. 22.

¹²³Ibid., p. 22.

Robeson's philosophy, like that of any other person, must be viewed as a dynamic and fluid phenomena. As we analyze his thought we must determine which philosophical tendency occupied the dominant position in his thought. If his views on culture are analyzed in this manner, we can see that Robeson came to view culture as the expression of a people's historical journey as productive beings. Moreover, this is a significant contrast from his early conception of culture as being the creation of the supernatural. His conception of the constraints capitalism placed on the culture of oppressed people is a further indication of his materialist conception of culture.

At the level of practice, Robeson's political activity was consistent with this theory, for as Foner contends,

Robeson was never content merely to...voice his theoretical opinion; invariably he placed his entire art and personality at the service of the principles in which he believed.¹²⁴

One of his fundamental principles was his belief in the primacy of organized labor. Between 1930 and 1950 he played a significant role in the effort to recruit black workers into the Congress of Industrial organizations (CIO).¹²⁵ He performed benefit concerts for and spoke on behalf of the CIO. Moreover, it is important to note that by supporting the CIO, as opposed to the American Federation of Labor(AFL), Robeson was holding to his belief in black-white labor unity, because during this time the AFL was still adhering to a policy of racially segregated unions. The CIO, on the other hand had "accepted

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 15.

¹²⁵Charles H. Wright, Robeson: Labor's Forgotten Champion (Detroit: Balamp Publishers, 1975), pp. 5-23.

the premise that there must be no discrimination in the ranks of labor."¹²⁶

Robeson's support of anti-imperialist national liberation struggles also testifies to the nature of his political philosophy. He held that if colonial people were to be free, imperialist exploitation of nations had to end. This, he argued, could not be achieved without a national liberation, carried by the ordinary working people of the colonial territories. Furthermore, in citing imperialism as the primary contradiction facing colonial peoples Robeson identified the systemic causes of world oppression, and not simply the effects. Thus, like the Marxist, his views on this question exposed the source of colonial plunder, and showed the need for fundamental social transformation.

Robeson also confronted the issue of imperialism and national liberation at the level of practice. His work with the council on African Affairs is the best indication of this. Through the council he exposed the reactionary character of American foreign policy toward Africa. He also helped to generate moral and material support for the African liberation struggles. In short, it may be argued that Robeson's support of African national liberation struggles was the epitome of revolutionary internationalism.

Robeson's position on the working class and labor unions is another indication of the consistency between Robeson's thought and

¹²⁶Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker. (New York International Publishers, 1982), p. 215.

Marxist philosophy. Consistent with the Marxist critique of capitalism, Robeson viewed the working class as the exploited and productive group in capitalist society. It was the working people, he often said, that creates the wealth in American society, yet it is enjoyed and controlled by a privileged few. By focusing on the working class as the producers of all wealth, Robeson was also articulating a fundamental principle of Marxian political economy. At the same time he was also transcending unscientific psychological conceptions of the exploitive designs of white people; as well as narrow nationalist notions of the super exploitation of blacks in America. This is not to suggest, however, that Robeson viewed the exploitation of blacks in simple economic terms. The point is that for Robeson "the persecution of black Americans and other racial minorities in the United States was both a racial and a class question."¹²⁷

At the level of practice Robeson was also in agreement with the Marxist on the vanguard role the working class would play in the destruction of capitalism. As a result of his study and political struggles, he reached the conclusion that the working class is the only group in capitalist society with an objective interest in, and the capacity of, delivering the death blow to capitalism. He also realized, however, that this process would not occur automatically. That is, he understood the need to develop working class consciousness

¹²⁷Foner, Robeson Speaks, p. 15.

and organization. His consistent support of organized labor was a clear manifestation of this. It should also be noted that Robeson always sought to carry the cause of organized labor beyond the limits of narrow trade unionism, on to broader political issues.

For Robeson the labor union was the primary and most powerful weapon the working class had in its struggle against the capitalist class. This was viewed as being especially true in the struggle by blacks against racial discrimination. Moreover, for Robeson this also called for a significant degree of black-white labor unity. However, in calling for this racial unity Robeson was not compromising the special need for black leadership. That is, although,

Black-white labor unity was...a key element in Robeson's concept of the freedom movement,...one must add that he was firm in the belief that such coalitions had to be under black leadership....¹²⁸

¹²⁸Foner, Ibid., p. 15.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion was not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of Paul Robeson's political thought. The analysis was deliberately limited to an assessment of Robeson's views on: culture; national liberation and imperialism; and the working class and labor unions, which carries with it significant limitations. Moreover, the primary aim of the study was to determine whether Robeson's political thought could be characterized as Marxist-Leninist. Consequently, the analysis may have raised many questions that were never answered. This does not mean that such questions are deemed irrelevant; however, they are issues that must constitute the basis of other studies. If our analysis has generated future research questions, then our work was not an exercise in futility.

Given his views on: culture; national liberation and imperialism; and the working class and labor unions, Paul Robeson's political thought can be characterized as Marxist-Leninist. The analysis shows that his initial views on culture were based on a metaphysical world view; but this changed as he developed a materialistic and dialectical view of culture. He moved from a world view that cited God as the creator of culture to an orientation that viewed culture as the creation of mortal man, and the product of man's history as a socially productive being. He also came to realize that as a system of social production, capitalism was antithetical to the development of the culture of oppressed groups. The influence of this particular development on his thought was also reflected in his practice as an artist.

As an artist Robeson's praxis shows that he clearly understood the political and ideological significance of culture. This was reflected in his propensity to pay strict attention to the political implications of a given film or play. Which resulted in his refusing roles in several major motion pictures that he thought were negative portrayals of African people. It was also reflected in the nature of his work as a concert singer, wherein his concerts were composed primarily of black spirituals, along with the folk songs of various countries.

His thoughts on imperialism and national liberation converge with Marxist-Leninist conceptions also. Consistent with the thrust of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, he viewed the destruction and degradation of Africa, Asia, and Latin America as the product of imperialist exploitation of these areas by European capitalist. His views on this subject were also premised on the belief that there was a dialectical relationship between imperialism and national liberation. That is, he viewed national liberation movements as the logical response to imperialist exploitation. Moreover, national liberation in his view had to involve more than political independence. Invariably it had to constitute a break with the entire system of exploitation and the commencement of free and independent social, political, cultural, and economic development. This he said "could not be achieved by foreign financial concerns whose only aim is to make the greatest profit out of"¹²⁹ exploiting the Africans, Asians,

¹²⁹Foner, Robeson Speaks, p. 193.

and Latin Americans.

His view on the working class and labor unions is also consistent with Marxist-Leninist philosophy. The analysis shows that he believed that the ultimate freedom of black and working class people would only come through the organization and militant struggles of the working class. This general struggle of labor unions, he held, had to transcend narrow trade unionism and begin to address wider political concerns. Although he firmly believed in the principal of multiracial working class unity, he did not underestimate the contradiction this involved in the context of North America, nor did he forget the need for black leadership in such a coalition.

Finally, the analysis shows that an analysis of Robeson's political thought, which focused on more than one theme, is more insightful than that which deals with a single theme. It also shows that Robeson's philosophy changed and developed along with his intellectual and political growth; and this, we contend, demands that any assessment of Robeson's political thought must be designed to take these changes into consideration, and to determine what particular philosophical tendency occupied the dominant position in his thought at a given juncture. As critics of Robeson, Cruse and Stuckey fail on this point. They both approach Robeson's political thought as if it was a static phenomenon. If future studies in this area are to be useful, they must transcend this tendency along with the tendency to approach Marxist-Leninist theorist with an ambivalence that borders on the anti-intellectual at best, and anti-communist at worst. In

Robeson's case it is clear that his political life was guided by a commitment to the principles of Marxism-Leninism. This is clearly reflected in his writings when he notes that,

On many occasions I have publicly expressed my belief in the principles of scientific socialism, my deep conviction that for all mankind a socialist society represents an advance to a higher stage of life--that it is a form of society which economically, socially, culturally, and ethically superior to a system based upon production for private profit. History shows that the processes of social change have nothing in common with silly notions about "plots" and "conspiracies." The development of human society--from tribalism to feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism--is brought about by the needs and aspirations of mankind for a better life.¹³⁰

Therefore, as analysts we should focus more on an interpretation of this tendency with respect to the political practice of Robeson as opposed to developing critiques which deny its presence and influence. The development of future studies which takes into consideration these points will create a foundation that is conducive to critical discussions of Robeson's long and controversial political life.

¹³⁰Robeson, Here I Stand, p. 39.

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